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ABSTRACT

Forming a genuine partnership with parents from across the social spectrum is one of the challenges facing schools. The development of a "family room"--a basic meeting place and playroom with comfortable furniture, toys, a tea kettle, and other equipment for families--became a collaborative adventure shared by parents, staff, and a local community project in Aberdeen, Scotland. The family room proved to be a useful resource for easing the transition from home to nursery for poor and socially isolated children and parents. The family room drew into the school a group of isolated parents most in need of support and most unlikely to have become involved in classroom-based activities. The parents found the room socially valuable to both themselves and their younger children, especially for meeting new people and getting support. Parents and staff (n=37) were interviewed by an outsider for this study. The staff felt the experience led to a greater understanding of the children's backgrounds and to a new respect for the caring and coping abilities of the mothers. This paper describes the evolution of the family room; an evaluation of parents' and staff's perceptions of the room; and the use, value, organization, and place of the room in the structured school. (SM)

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From Store Cupboard to Family Room: How parents pushed open the doors of a Scottish nursery school

Elly Alexander

Young Families Now project
Aberdeen, Scotland

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Editorial history

This paper arose out of an evaluation of a part of the *Young Families Now* project in Aberdeen, Scotland. It was originally published by Multilingual Matters, Ltd. (Bank House, 8A Hill Road, Clevedon, Avon, England) in its journal *Evaluation and Research in Education* Vol. 4, No.3, 1990 under the title *A Family Room in a Nursery School: an evaluation*. It is reproduced here with due acknowledgement to the publishers.

A detailed study of the *Young Families Now* project is contained in a doctoral thesis from the University of Aberdeen, *Education for Mothers and Children: A Contribution to Community Development* by the project director, Dr. Marion Flett.

About the author

For the past six years, Elly Alexander has been a field officer with the project *Young Families Now*, in Aberdeen, Scotland. The mother of three young children, she has a degree in psychology and trained as a teacher.

She recently left the project to undertake a two-year full-time course in educational psychology at Dundee University.

About the project

Torry, a former close-knit fishing community to the east of Aberdeen, Scotland, has seen its principal industry decline, bringing with it isolation and deprivation. The project *Young Families Now* has sought to empower the local community by getting parents and professionals to work together to develop new forms of learning opportunities for children and families. The project provides opportunities for child, parent and child-parent activities, with emphasis on support for community-based activities and the development of local networks. For the past six years its work has been supported by Grampian Regional Council, the University of Aberdeen and the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Bernard van Leer Foundation

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Introduction

Forming a genuine partnership with parents from across the whole social spectrum is one of the challenges that faces schools today. Parental interest and encouragement are crucial to a child's progress. So also are the teacher's knowledge and understanding, and respect for the child's home experience.

The development of the Family Room at Torry Nursery School in Aberdeen extended the frontiers of parental involvement. It was not carefully planned, with clear aims and objectives, but evolved from the synchrony of several factors – the changing climate in nursery education, a head teacher who was willing to take risks, the presence in the area of a community development project called *Young Families Now*, and a group of parents with 'a foot in the door' who could see the value for other families of pushing it open a bit more.

Torry is a mixed working-class area in Aberdeen, with pockets of multiple deprivation. Separated from the rest of the city by river, rail and sea, it was in the past renowned for its close-knit community. But with the decline of the Scottish fishing industry, it has undergone rapid social change. Although some extended family networks can still be found, there are also now many young families living in social isolation.

The nursery school in Torry is more than 50 years old. A purpose-built nursery, with four airy classrooms accomodating 80 children, it still looks remarkably modern. But, until recently, it had no space for parents. In 1938, when it was built, parental involvement was not an issue. Nurseries were for children.

In 1985 the head teacher had recognised that, although the nursery had introduced many different ways of involving parents during the school day, there was a group of parents, lingering at the classroom door and talking to each other, who indicated a different set of needs – for adult company, and for practical and emotional support in the challenging task of bringing up young children, often in poor housing and on a limited budget.

She decided to make the small staffroom available for parents to use in the first few hours of the day, before the staff break. Interestingly, no real use was made of this facility until she changed the notice on the door – from STAFF ROOM to COFFEE ROOM – thus breaking down one of the first psychological barriers. Gradually, a small group of women began meeting in the room for coffee and a chat. Some had younger children, who had to be kept strapped in their buggies because of the lack of space.

This was the situation when a new head teacher was appointed in 1986. She approached the community development project *Young Families Now* and asked for one of the workers to drop in to see if it was possible to start a discussion group.

The regular users of the COFFEE ROOM had no enthusiasm for an organised group. What they did want was their own room, where they could stay after 10.15, and where their younger children could have more freedom to move. Such facilities did exist nearby, at the project's own centre, but these parents identified with, and felt comfortable in, the nursery. The head teacher too was concerned to make the nursery even more welcoming to parents and, in particular, to meet the needs of the group of parents who identified themselves as needing a solution to loneliness and boredom. She suggested that perhaps an old store cupboard at the far end of the nursery could be cleaned and made into a makeshift 'family room'.

This was the beginning. It was now June 1987 and most of the parents using the coffee room would soon be moving on with their children to the primary school after the summer holidays. Nevertheless they scrubbed and cleaned, shifted furniture and equipment, to transform the cupboard into a comfortable, if basic, meeting place and playroom. *Young Families Now* provided worker support, as well as a small grant for second-hand furniture, baby toys and equipment. Paper, paints, jigsaws, a sand tray, a kettle and cups were all supplied by the nursery itself, and soon the room was ready for the new intake of families.

The autumn term was an exciting one for the nursery's Family Room. Liz, the head teacher, Fay, one of the parents involved from the initial stages, and the worker from *Young Families Now* met and discussed ways of welcoming the new parents during the staggered intake of pupils from August to November. Soon the room was buzzing each morning with the chatter of children playing and coffee cups clinking.

There were, of course, problems. There was friction with the kitchen and domestic staff over the 'mess', and the shared use of toilets. Some coffee money went 'missing'. Perhaps most serious of all, as the weather changed, the room (which had no heating) became cold and less inviting.

At the end of September, a meeting was arranged in the Family Room with a representative from the Local Authority and the adviser for primary education. The staff and the parents were now asking for heating, ventilation, a carpet and some painting to be done. Recognising the educational potential of such a room, the representatives went even further – they called for a complete overhaul and extension of the room, to include a kitchen area and separate toilets.

The plans for this work became stuck in the bureaucratic machinery, and once again the parents who had used the room moved on with their children to primary school. There was even a chance that the money for these improvements could not be found. But meanwhile a portable heater was moved into the room and finally recruitment started for a discussion group. These informal self-help meetings proved very popular, with around a dozen mothers attending every week. The group continued into the following Spring term, and made a link with a local health visitor who set up a Keep Fit, Healthy Eating group in the clinic next door.

Many of the women also used the Family Room as a springboard to find out about, and try, other Adult Education opportunities offered in the area. These included a Basic Literacy class, a craft group and a new initiative to support women in returning to the local secondary school to gain qualifications for future jobs.

Meanwhile their determination to develop the room itself finally persuaded the authorities to refurbish the premises, and in the autumn of 1988 – when the school celebrated its 50th birthday – a new, bright and fully furnished Family Room was ready and waiting for a new set of parents.

Staff expectations at the beginning of the new school year were high. They had been impressed by the level of activity generated by a parent group who, as individuals, had seemed so reticent and uncertain of themselves. If all this could be achieved in a converted cupboard, what could happen now that they had a fully-furnished room? But the process of development is not a smooth one. The original parents, who had visibly grown in their own personal development, had left with their children for primary school. A room, however well equipped, is only a space, and for the new parents it was a totally new experience.

There were also new pressures. Increased interest was being shown by outsiders in this 'show piece'. Visitors, including staff from other schools, wanted to know – 'Does it work?' What were the benefits for parents, children and the school itself? To respond to this growing demand for information, an evaluation of this feature of the nursery school was begun in the summer of 1989.

The study

The evaluation took the form of an interview study of parents' and staff's perceptions. This was chosen in preference to an open-ended questionnaire, as many of the parent users had poor educational skills and would have felt uncomfortable with a written document. The interview schedules were designed to elicit a picture of perceptions of the room's function, its benefits and disadvantages, and were as open-ended as possible to ensure that participants had freedom to express their views. A draft version of the schedule was piloted in a reunion of the parents who had been involved the previous year. The topics covered were: use of room; perceptions of the room's value; the place of the room in the structure of the school; which people dropped out, or did not use the room; the organisation of the room; and the networks resulting from the provision.

The interviewer was an outsider, unknown to the participants and without any detailed knowledge of the workings of the Family Room. To accomodate the different circumstances of people, there were variations in the schedule for the different groups: committee members; regular users; users who had dropped out; non-users; as well as staff.

Thirty-seven people were interviewed. Parents were spoken to in their own homes – all nine members of the parent committee, seven of the other 15 regular users (chosen at random) – with a stratified sample to give as full a picture as possible of the different perspectives. All 11 members of the staff were interviewed in a private room in the nursery.

Five non-users were interviewed. There were 80 pupils at the nursery, so obviously non-user parents formed the largest group. For most of these, the room was not relevant, because they were in full-time work or perhaps because they did not themselves bring or fetch their children. The non-users we interviewed were therefore identified as a group of women who did come to the nursery regularly, and would have been able to use the room if they had chosen to do so. Finally, we included four parents who had started using the room, but had stopped doing so.

Results: the use and value of the room

The overall impression was that the room provided a positive experience which extended the social opportunities within the nursery:

> It's a good idea and is handy to have in the nursery. I can't imagine Torry nursery without it! (committee member)

> I think it's a good place for any parent, especially if you are on your own. I think it's great, I really do. (regular user, single parent)

But the interviews also revealed instances of it falling short of expectations:

> It is only meeting certain social needs of a small set of parents. It does not reach out to parents enough. (staff member)

> Not enough activities for parents without younger children. I would have liked practical classes like knitting, crafts, sewing ... (committee member)

Perhaps the ambivalence can be best summed up in the words of the Primary Schools Adviser:

> One of the problems or challenges is that the more you raise awareness, the greater are the pressures to do more ... People's expectations and ideas of what is possible are continually pushing up.

Of the 16 regular users and committee members interviewed, 13 used the room for part of each morning and afternoon. Three said they spent all day, nearly every day, in the room. The users interviewed saw the Family Room as of benefit to both themselves and their young children:

> It was good for the kids to meet other kids ... it gave me a break.

> Easy going and relaxed ... you could share problems and have a good laugh.

The five non-users were all positive about the value of the room for others, particularly those with younger children, but led their own busy lives and had neither the time nor inclination to use the room for themselves:

> To be honest, I didn't have time to sit and drink coffee.

> They did encourage me to use it, but I never had the time ... I have just managed to get him into the nursery, and now they want me to stay there!

For this group, non-participation was a positive choice. But why then did eight parents who started using the room subsequently drop out? Of the four people interviewed, two had practical reasons – one returned to full-time work, another was caring for a sick relative. But 'drop-out' users also mentioned feeling uncomfortable:

> It became clannish – I did not feel welcome.

> If your face didn't fit ... that sort of thing.

Unlike the non-users, their non-participation was not wholly of their own choice. Once a group has become established, it is less easy for other members who might drop in less frequently to feel fully accepted. At the start of the year, the project worker and nursery staff were able to commit more of their time to introducing new people, to ensure they were made welcome and brought into conversations. Regular users saw themselves, and the room, as being open to all, but perhaps they did not possess the social skills to always translate this goodwill into practice.

The place of the room in the structure of the school

Ten of the 16 parent users interviewed mentioned examples of the way the Family Room eased the transition from home to nursery. This 'settling in' function was also identified as a positive benefit by nearly all the staff. Parents expressed many other perceptions of benefits:

> For mothers to meet and socialise. Younger children can get used to the nursery and meet other children. It enables mothers to feel part of the school.

> The Torry community has a large number of single parents and low-income families who need support and this is one way of helping the community.

> It helps sharing with other mums if a child or parent has any difficulties.

Twelve out of the 16 thought that the Family Room had successfully met all its aims. The parents also talked positively about the increased informal contact with staff which had been brought about (including successful 'nights out' once a term).

Teachers and nursery nurses were less confident that all the aims had been fulfilled. Only three out of eleven responses were completely positive. The other eight expressed reservations concerning the limited number of parents who actually used the room. These doubts were not shared, however, by the head teacher or the primary school adviser, neither of whom had ever thought that the room would be used by the majority of parents. Indeed, the head teacher believed that the greatest success had been that the room had attracted to the school some of the most isolated parents, those with least resources, who would otherwise not be expected to participate in the more conventional range of parental involvement activities.

The head teacher and primary adviser both pointed to the development of professional skills among the staff as one of the aims of the Family Room:

> It also aids in staff development, as staff attitudes and values are being challenged.

> I felt professional skills were developed although, because of lack of experience, it was very hard. The parents' view of the nursery also changed. There have been changes in power relationships, especially in notions of responsibility, and in negotiations with parents. (head teacher)

There is evidence of this learning experience from staff themselves:

> It has given me insight into what the mothers' lives are like, of their need to get out of their flats.

This same member of staff questioned, now, the role of mothers acting as volunteer classroom helpers:

> We could call in mothers (in the Family Room) as helpers, but we began to be more sensitive to mothers' perceptions of themselves, and not just as 'helpers' ... Also, they may not have wanted to be in the classroom as a helper!

The organisation of the room

In January 1989 a parents' committee was set up to share out the tasks involved in running the Family Room. A majority of staff believed that the committee should have been created much earlier and, with hindsight, many parents agreed. On the other hand, the committee was more purposeful and acceptable because it actually arose out of a recognised need during the painful process of development, rather than being imposed at the start.

Earlier disputes in the Family Room, and confusion about responsibilities, led to a more open clarification of the acceptable limits to parent users' power. Decisions became negotiable between parents and staff, although the head teacher retained a veto in terms of ultimate responsibility. The most positive feelings on this organisational aspect came from the committee members themselves, who described progress not only in terms of the running of the room, but also of their own personal growth:

> I liked to be involved and to get things done.
>
> I got used to compromising, and to listening to other people.
>
> It gave me confidence, and I am now going to join the Parents Association at the primary school.
>
> I enjoyed it, I saw how things worked, how decisions were made. It helped me, as I'm quite shy. I felt it was a kind of job.

But there were also exceptions:

> I did not enjoy it. I would have liked to have backed out, but I decided to stick it out. I learned I did not like telling people what to do.

And some thoughtful critical comment:

> Yes, I liked it ... but I was not given a wide enough scope, and I was not able to speak out about the pressures ...There was not enough time at meetings, and there was no training. But I did learn how to cope better with stressful situations.

As the year went on, parents' expectations also rose, and so the demand grew for more Adult Education opportunities. The major barrier here was the lack of suitable and reliable childcare for the younger children. Understandably, staff were unwilling to accomodate crèche workers in the classrooms to fulfil this need.

Networks

Meeting new people, finding company, getting support and developing friendships were the most often cited benefits from using the Family Room. Fourteen out of 16 parents interviewed said that they had made new friends there.

The short-term benefits of having a readily available support network of other people in a similar situation are unquestionable. Only time will tell how many of these relationships will develop further into lasting friendships of even greater value. The reunion at which the interview schedule was piloted, and which involved a dozen parents who still meet in each other's homes, is testimony to the possibility that such friendships may indeed endure beyond the nursery experience.

Discussion

The development of the Family Room from an old store cupboard was a collaborative adventure shared by parents, staff and a local community project. The room has proved to be a useful resource for easing the transition from home to nursery, for both children and parents. A majority of the total parent population used it on their child's first day, as a reassurance for themselves and their children during this 'settling-in' period. The staff, all of whom were involved in introducing new parents to the room, felt that it helped get parental and staff relationships off to a good start.

The parent users who went on to make use of the room throughout the year found it socially valuable to both themselves and their younger children. Although many staff felt disappointed that not more parents made regular use of the room, it certainly met its original aims to draw into the school a group of isolated parents most in need of support, who were unlikely to have become involved in classroom-based activities.

Staff reactions to the developments in the Family Room were more mixed. Some teachers felt threatened by its presence, as a source of parental activities that was outside their control and unpredictable in its outcomes. It also raised, for them, tensions between meeting the needs of children in their classrooms and the needs of parents for support. Staff are trained to nurture child development, and it required an act of faith in the long-term benefits to justify time spent with parents as adults, and not just or necessarily in their parenting roles.

But staff members also felt that the experience had opened their eyes to the struggles and hardships of mothers' lives in the area, and this led not only to a greater understanding of the children's backgrounds, but also to a new respect for the caring and coping abilities of the women.

Classically, two teachers expressed the fear that if the nursery school was to go on developing this area of parental involvement, their own roles would become confused with that of social workers.

There was a general agreement among both users and staff that the process of development did not 'just happen'. Time given to the group from both the head teacher and the community project worker proved essential in ensuring that people were made welcome and comfortable. They were also able to pick up and support ideas coming from the group as these emerged, and to facilitate setting up the committee when the users felt it necessary to have more organisation. Recognising the importance of this 'enabling' role, one of the parents who originally fought for the Family Room was subsequently appointed by the

community project *Young Families Now* to act as a part-time development worker for the Family Room.

Some staff expressed the hope that the room would develop a more structured approach to meeting the educational needs of the younger children. By the end of the year many parents, too, wanted something more. By and large mothers were happy with the opportunities the room provided for their own children – to play and share, with one weekly session set aside for playgroup activities. But they wanted more time for themselves to take part in adult education activities.

The room provided an arena for staff and parents to work towards a greater understanding of each other's perspectives. But it also had the effect of raising expectations which could not readily be met. This can be viewed as dangerous if it causes frustration and anger when the resources do not exist to meet the newly identified needs. But more positively, it can also provide an impetus for change, and a stimulus for a search for new solutions.

The development of the Family Room was innovative in the way parents were given the opportunity to shape its growth. What has emerged from this study is the way this process was enabling to both parents and the nursery staff, leading to genuinely shared learning experiences.

It is unlikely that the room would have nurtured the same personal growth if it had been set up wholly as a school initiative, with an imposed structure, rules and regulations. On the contrary, this may well have reinforced, rather than weakened, the traditional perceptions of the institutional demarcation of power and status.

The Family Room in Torry nursery school is not static. It will continue to change with the yearly turnover of families, but it has already demonstrated one practical strategy for bridging the differing views, experiences, expectations and styles between home and school.

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Studies and Evaluation Papers is a series of background documents drawn from field experience to present relevant findings and reflections on 'work in progress'. The series therefore acts primarily as a forum for the exchange of ideas.

As such, the findings, interpretations, conclusions and views expressed are exclusively those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

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Contributions to this series are welcomed. Suggestions should in the first instance be addressed to: Nico van Oudenhoven, Deputy Executive Director, Bernard van Leer Foundation, at the address given below.

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The Bernard van Leer Foundation is an international, philanthropic and professional institution based in The Netherlands. Created in 1949 for broad humanitarian purposes, the Foundation concentrates its resources on support for the development of community-led and culturally appropriate initiatives that focus on the developmental needs of children from birth to eight years of age. Currently, the Foundation supports some 100 major projects in more than 40 developing and industrialised countries.

As part of its mandate, the Foundation also supports evaluation, training and the dissemination of project experiences to an international audience. It communicates the outcomes of these activities to international agencies, institutions and governments, with the aim of improving practice and influencing policies to benefit children.

The Foundation's income is derived from the Van Leer Group of Companies – established by Bernard van Leer in 1919 – a worldwide industrial enterprise of which the Foundation is the principal beneficiary. In accordance with its Statutes, the Foundation gives preference in its project support to activities in countries which have an industrial involvement with the manufacturing companies.

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